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Vietnam

History

People have lived in what is now Vietnam since prehistoric times. Archaeologists have discovered remains of a stone age culture dating back about 500,000 years in the province of Thanh Hoa. Agriculture developed in northern Vietnam more than 7,000 years ago.

About 5,000 years ago, a kingdom called Van Lang emerged in the Black and Red river valleys under the rule of the Hung kings. One of the most important cultures of Van Lang, the Dong Son civilization, flourished in the valleys of the Red and Ma rivers from about 800 to 300 B.C. This civilization is known mainly for its elaborately decorated bronze drums.



Map

Indochina
Peninsula about
A.D. 300

Nam Viet. In 258 B.C., a leader named An Duong founded the kingdom of Au Lac. In 207 B.C., an official of China's Qin dynasty named Zhao Tuo (Trieu Da in Vietnamese) founded the kingdom of Nam Viet. Nam Viet included Au Lac and several other kingdoms in what is now northern Vietnam. In 111 B.C., the Chinese Han dynasty conquered Nam Viet. Through the centuries, many Vietnamese resisted Chinese rule. But not until A.D. 939, as a result of a rebellion led by Ngo Quyen, did the Vietnamese gain independence.

Despite the centuries of Chinese occupation, many aspects of Vietnamese culture remained in place, but new patterns also emerged. Specifically, the rise of a mixed Chinese and Vietnamese ruling class ensured the lasting importance of Chinese writing, even though the Vietnamese continued to speak their own language. Chinese ideas of historical writing also had an enormous impact on how Vietnamese historians represented their past. Vietnamese officials sometimes adopted Chinese administrative practices. The Three Teachings—Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism—are another legacy of Chinese rule.

Independence. After Ngo Quyen's death in 944, Vietnam was troubled by succession disputes and the competition of warlords. These troubles ended with the establishment of the Dinh dynasty in 968, though the dynasty lasted only 12 years. The succeeding dynasty, established in 980, lasted only until 1009. Two long-lasting dynasties, the Ly (1009-1225) and the Tran (1225-1400), stabilized politics.

In 1400, Ho Quy Ly seized the Vietnamese throne, and in 1407, the Ming Chinese invaded the country and took control. In 1428, Le Loi drove out the Chinese rulers and established the Le dynasty. Under the Le rulers, the Vietnamese empire continued the process of Nam Tien (Advance to the South). During the 1400's, for example, the Vietnamese conquered Champa, a rival kingdom in what is now central Vietnam.

In 1527, the Mac dynasty overthrew the Le dynasty, and, in 1540, was formally recognized by the Ming Chinese. Le forces regained control over central Vietnam in 1545 and northern Vietnam in 1592. However, Mac forces continued to fight against the Le for more than 35 years.

During the mid-1500's, Vietnamese politics became further fragmented as the Trinh and Nguyen families, the two clans closest to the Le court, drifted apart. By 1600, the country was effectively divided, and the Le kept control in name only. Even though the Ming Chinese had recognized the Le dynasty as ruler of Vietnam, the Trinh lords actually governed the north and the Nguyen lords were in charge of the south. In the 1600's, the rivalry between these two clans occasionally erupted into armed conflict.

The Nguyen lords continued their expansion to the south until 1771. That year, three brothers from the region of Tay Son in central Vietnam began a series of successful attacks against Nguyen rule. This upheaval, known as the Tay Son Rebellion, resulted in the collapse of Nguyen power in the south, Trinh power in the north, and, in 1788, the end of the Le dynasty. After defending Vietnam against an invasion of Qing Chinese troops in 1789, the Tay Son dynasty tried to consolidate its rule over all of what is now Vietnam.

In 1802, Nguyen Anh became the first emperor of the Nguyen dynasty. He took the reign name of Gia

Long. He united the country and called it Vietnam. The Nguyen dynasty, Vietnam's last, established its capital in Hue. It formally ended in 1945.

French rule. In 1858, French warships captured the city of Da Nang. The French claimed that they were protecting Jesuit missionaries and Vietnamese who had converted to Roman Catholicism. By continuing the armed attacks and through diplomatic pressure, France succeeded in taking control of the southern part of Vietnam, known then as Cochinchina, in the 1860's. In the 1880's, France took control of the northern (Tonkin) and central (Annam) parts of Vietnam. With the conquest of Cambodia in the 1860's and of Laos in the 1890's, French control of Indochina was complete.

The French were principally interested in Vietnam and the surrounding area as a base for trading with China. They also hoped to exploit the mineral wealth of Vietnam and to establish plantations for coffee, rubber, and tea. To help carry out these plans, the French built roads and railways, which linked the lowlands, the midlands, and the mountains. They also expanded port facilities.

Under French rule, the traditional Vietnamese ruling class withdrew from public life, and a new French-Vietnamese ruling class emerged. The romanized written version of Vietnamese known as *quoc ngu* also became more prominent in private and public affairs.

Through the years, Vietnamese resistance to French rule grew. Various nationalist associations and societies emerged, as did a number of political parties. These parties included the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, Indochinese Communist Party, and the New Vietnamese Revolutionary Party.



Map
Indochina
Peninsula in
1900

The August Revolution of 1945. In August 1940, during World War II (1939-1945), France's wartime Vichy government granted Japan permission to use northern Vietnam for military operations. When Japanese troops advanced into other Southeast Asian colonies of European powers, they took control over the colonial governments. In Vietnam, the Japanese at first allowed French officials to continue to carry out their administrative duties. In March 1945, however, the Japanese ousted the French officials.



Picture

Ho Chi Minh

Initially, most Vietnamese had welcomed the Japanese, expecting that they would free Vietnam from French rule. When it seemed that Japan was also a threat to their independence, however, many Vietnamese reconsidered their plans to join with the Japanese to fight the French. One result of such reconsideration was the creation of an organization called the Vietminh in 1941. Established by Ho Chi Minh and other leaders of the Indochinese Communist Party, the Vietminh was designed to encourage national unity and independence.

Japan agreed to surrender on Aug. 14, 1945. Within days, anticolonial activists in Vietnam staged the August Revolution. On September 2, Ho recited Vietnam's declaration of independence, in which he quoted directly from the American Declaration of Independence. Ho and other revolutionary leaders expected that the United States would support the new postcolonial state—the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). They believed that they would receive such support for a number of reasons. For instance, the United States had gained its own independence through a revolution. The United States had also criticized European colonialism for most of the 1900's. In addition, the Vietminh had cooperated with U.S. diplomatic and military personnel during World War II. However, the DRV never received U.S. support, mainly because of U.S. opposition to Communism.

The Indochina War. After World War II, France tried to reclaim its former colonies in Southeast Asia. In 1946, war broke out between France and the Vietminh. Throughout the war, the French controlled cities in north and south Vietnam. The revolutionaries, based in the mountains of the north and northwest, controlled most of the countryside. Many southern Vietnamese rejected the idea of a Communist-dominated government and sided with the French. By mid-1949, the French had formed the Associated State of Vietnam to oppose the Vietminh. Bao Dai, the last of the Nguyen emperors, headed the government of the Associated State. The fighting in Vietnam ended in May 1954, when the Vietminh overwhelmed the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu.

Fearing the growth of Communism, the United States began in 1948 to channel aid to the countries of

Western Europe to help them rebuild after the devastation of World War II. The assistance provided by the Marshall Plan made it possible for France to rebuild and to continue fighting the war in Vietnam. Further expressing its support for the French attempt to reconquer Vietnam, the United States formally recognized the Associated State of Vietnam in 1950.

During the final stages of the First Indochina War, negotiators representing nine countries—Cambodia, China, France, Laos, the United Kingdom, the United States, the Soviet Union, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and the Associated State of Vietnam—assembled in Geneva, Switzerland. In July 1954, the representatives produced a series of agreements known as the Geneva Accords. See Back in Time: [Vietnam \(1954\)](#). One of these agreements provided that Vietnam be temporarily divided into northern and southern zones at the 17th parallel. Another agreement called for an election in 1956 to unify the country. Fearing that Ho Chi Minh would win such an election, however, southern Vietnamese, with U.S. support, refused to participate. The election was never held.

The Vietnam War began in 1957. It is sometimes called the Second Indochina War, and Vietnamese know it as the American War. Communist-supported rebels in the South began a revolt against the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, who was backed by the United States. United States military and civilian advisers then rushed to aid South Vietnam. Through the years, South Vietnam received extensive assistance from the United States, including cash, military equipment, and more than 500,000 troops. Despite this aid, South Vietnam failed to shape itself into a popularly supported, non-Communist state. In April 1975, the People's Army of North Vietnam launched an offensive that resulted in the complete collapse of Southern power.

The Vietnam War caused enormous destruction. In its attempt to block the transfer of supplies from the North to the South, the United States dropped tons of chemicals on the jungles and forests of central Vietnam. Parts of the country remained barren of vegetation for many years afterwards. The U.S. forces also destroyed many rice fields and villages. The Vietnam War resulted in the deaths of millions of Vietnamese, many of them civilians. More than 58,000 American military personnel also lost their lives. For a detailed discussion of the war, see [Vietnam War](#). See also Back in Time: [Vietnam \(1967\)](#); [Vietnam \(1968\)](#); [Vietnam \(1969\)](#); [Vietnam \(1970\)](#); [Vietnam \(1971\)](#); [Vietnam \(1972\)](#); [Vietnam \(1973\)](#).



Picture

Helicopters transport troops in Vietnam War

Postwar Vietnam. In April 1976, national elections determined the nearly 500 members of the new National Assembly for a reunited Vietnam. In July, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was officially proclaimed. In the process of establishing a single state, leaders of the new government sought out supporters of the former South Vietnamese government. According to official sources, more than 1 million southerners were subjected to some form of "reeducation" in the political culture of the North. For most of these people, this process took several days or weeks. But thousands of others, viewed as greater threats, spent a decade or more in labor camps.

Following reunification, thousands of northerners resettled in the south. As a consequence, the northern dialect of Vietnamese is now regarded officially as standard Vietnamese. In addition, the government has taken thousands of Kinh from the deltas and relocated them in the highlands and mountains.

With the collapse of the Southern regime, many Vietnamese fled the country. They settled in the United States, Canada, and Australia, or joined earlier generations of exiles in Belgium and France. Following the government's nationalization of industries, tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese also left the country.



Picture

Vietnamese refugees

Many refugees left Vietnam in small boats, risking drowning and pirate attacks in the South China Sea. These refugees became known as *boat people*. They went to other countries in Southeast Asia, where they stayed in refugee camps until they could be relocated. Many later moved to the United States. In the mid-1990's, the United Nations and countries that housed or helped pay for the camps closed nearly all of them. Most of the remaining refugees were sent back to Vietnam.

Invasion of Cambodia. In 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia. It replaced Cambodia's Khmer Rouge Communist government with a pro-Vietnamese Communist government. The Khmer Rouge and non-Communist groups then fought against the government and the Vietnamese forces in Cambodia. Vietnam gradually withdrew its troops in the 1980's, and the war ended in 1991.

Recent developments. In the late 1980's, the Vietnamese government began a program of economic restructuring known as *doi moi*. This program encouraged some forms of private enterprise and competition as well as foreign investment. In early July 1995, Vietnam and the United States established diplomatic ties. Later that month, Vietnam became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional organization that promotes political, economic, cultural, and social cooperation among its members. In July 2000, Vietnam and the United States signed a trade agreement. This pact cleared the way for normal trade relations between the two countries for the first time since the Vietnam War. In December 2006, the U.S. Congress passed a bill normalizing trade relations with Vietnam.

Contributor:

- Patricia M. Pelley, Ph.D., Associate Professor of History, Texas Tech University.

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